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Mexican Labor Since NAFTA

Are Workers on the Verge of a Breakthrough?

DAN LA BOTZ

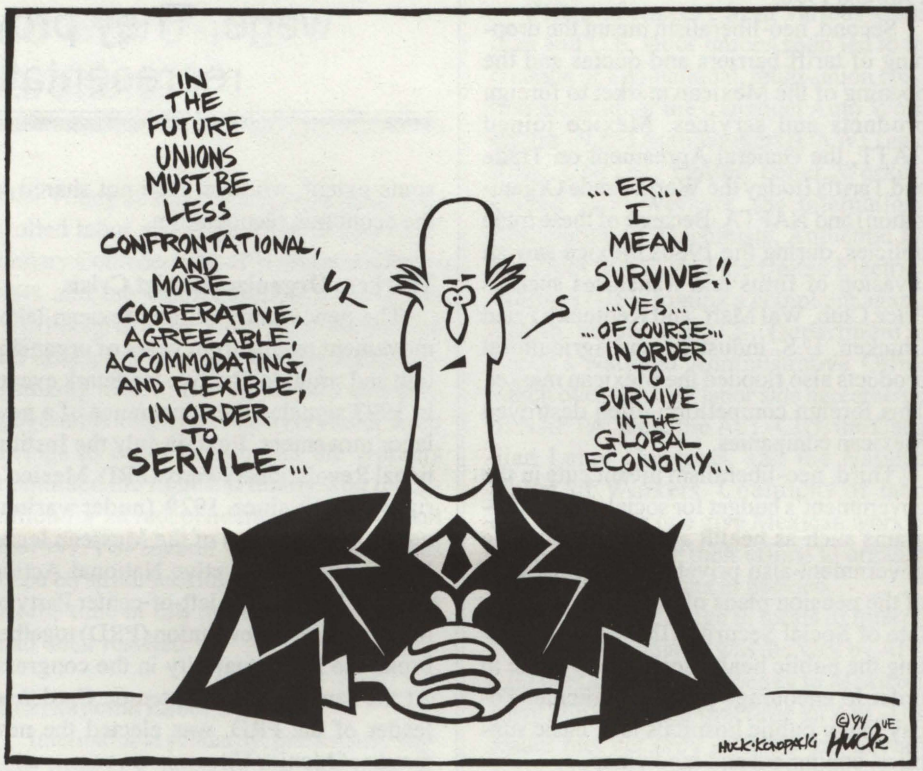
Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect on January 1, 1994, the Mexican labor movement has changed significantly. Could Mexican workers be on the verge of a breakthrough? And if so, what is the role of U.S. and Canadian unions and workers in this transition from state-run "official" unions to independent unions?

Since NAFTA, the Mexican labor movement has experienced a few significant events:

*The National Coordinating Committee of the Teachers Union revived and led demonstrations and strikes in May and June, 1998, of tens of thousands of teachers. The teachers are the most militant and dynamic sector of the Mexican labor movement.

* In late 1997, 50 automobile parts workers at the Han Young plant in Tijuana succeeded in organizing and winning legal recognition for the first independent union in the *maquiladora* plants. In June, 1998, they began a strike to attempt to force management to give them a collective bargaining agreement.

*Unions representing over a million workers founded the National Union of Workers (UNT) in November of last year. This new labor federation claims to stand for union democracy, independence from the state-party, and an alternative to the government's economic program, including NAFTA.



*Flight attendants at Aeromexico struck the airline over pay, benefits and contractual issues in June, 1998. The strike, by over 1,000 mostly women workers, has been seen as the symbol of the new labor movement and of the new federation with which their union is affiliated.

*The Mexican Congress is debating changes in the Mexican Federal Labor Law. If passed, it would bring the first significant changes in almost 30 years. However, employer proposals call for greater "flexibility" of labor, including the legalization of part-time employment.

Could these events be signs of the breakthrough so long awaited: the reap-

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pearance of working class militancy and the emergence of independent unionism as a force in Mexico?

Why the Ferment?

The background to this new wave of labor organizing can be found in Mexico's vaunted neo-liberal counter-revolution of the 1980s. In Mexico neo-liberalism meant a number of things. First, the privatization of state industries, often to foreign capital. For example, the Mexican Telephone Company (TELMEX) was sold to a private consortium including Southwest Bell. Eventually the government sold off over 1,000 state-owned firms. As the government sold-off state owned plants it not only laid-off tens of thousands of workers, but also often severely weakened the labor unions and collective bargaining agreements. Workers real wages—their actual purchasing power—fell by at least half between 1982 and 1998.

Second, neo-liberalism meant the dropping of tariff barriers and quotas and the opening of the Mexican market to foreign products and services. Mexico joined GATT, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (today the World Trade Organization) and NAFTA. Because of these trade policies, during the 1980s Mexico saw an invasion of firms and franchises such as Price Club, Wal Mart, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. U.S. industrial and agricultural products also flooded the Mexican market. This foreign competition often destroyed Mexican companies.

Third, neo-liberalism meant cuts in the government's budget for social service programs such as health and education. The government also privatized the financing of the pension plans of the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS), while letting the public health sector deteriorate in order to encourage private medicine. Today many public hospitals lack basic supplies, equipment and medicines.

At the end of 1994, Mexico experienced a major *peso* devaluation, a stock market crash, and a deep economic crisis. Unable to find work, millions of Mexicans—half of the total economically active population—moved into the informal or underground economy. They now work for employers who pay no taxes, do not offer coverage by the Mexican health system, and do not have unions.

Mexico's current president Ernesto Zedillo came to power in 1994 pledging to continue these conservative economic policies. But the events of 1994 called everything into question. On January 1, 1994—the day NAFTA went into effect—the year opened with the Chiapas Rebellion, an uprising of Mayan peasants in Mexico's most southerly state. The year closed in December with the *peso* devaluation and stock market crash. The economic crash of December 1994 led to three years of economic depression, the worst in Mexico since the late 1920s. Economic crisis became the motor driving both political and labor reform. Although capital has recovered to some extent, workers have not shared in the economic recuperation.

Workers Organize Amidst Crisis

The new vitality of the Mexican labor movement results from years of organization and struggle. But two landmark events in 1997 signaled the appearance of a new labor movement. First, in July the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Mexico's ruling party since 1929 (under various names), lost control of the Mexican legislature. The conservative National Action Party (PAN) and the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) together broke the PRI's majority in the congress. At the same time Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, leader of the PRD, was elected the new mayor of Mexico City.

Second, in August 1997 Fidel Velazquez died at the age of 93. For 50 years Velazquez headed the Confederation of Mexican Workers and had dominated the Mexican labor movement, keeping it under the control of the PRI. His death opened the way for change.

The defeat of the PRI and the death of Velazquez were followed almost immediately by the organization of the National Union of Workers (UNT). The driving force behind the creation of the UNT was Francisco Hernandez Juarez, the head of the Mexican Telephone Workers Union with 50,000 members. He shares the leadership of the UNT with two other union heads: Antonio Rosado of the National Union of Social Security Workers with 350,000 members, and Antonio Rodriguez, the head of the Union of Workers of the National Autonomous University of Mexico with about 30,000 members.

The UNT represents over 200 unions with between one and two million members, and puts forward a program calling for political

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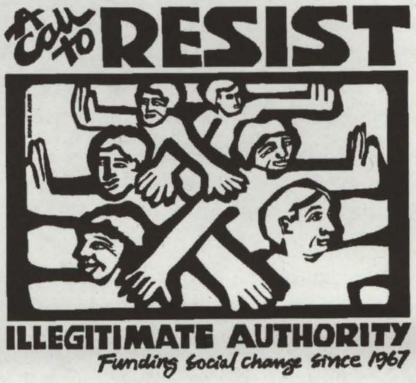
"Official" unions negotiate contracts which contain only the legal minimum wages, which are significantly below a livable wage. They provide no other sort of representation for workers.



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independence, union democracy, and an alternative economic program. Though the UNT has yet to achieve those goals—its main leaders Hernandez Juarez and Rosado remain leaders of the PRI and therefore politically connected—it does represent an important break with the past, and opens possibilities for the future.

The small but very important Authentic Labor Front (FAT), a federation of independent unions, cooperatives, community groups, and peasant organizations, plays an important role in pushing to make the UNT more genuinely democratic and independent.

The Mexican labor movement is changing because of the courage or rank-and-file workers like those at Han Young who are standing up for their rights.

But at the small Han Young plant in Tijuana last year some 50 workers, fed up with health and safety problems, low wages and poor benefits and lack of representation from their pro- government unions, decided to form an independent union. The Han Young company, the government controlled labor unions (such as the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants and the Confederation of Mexican Workers), and the local labor authorities all attempted to stop the independent organizing effort. The employers and pro-government unions used everything from firings to death threats, but the workers continued the fight and finally won recognition for an independent union at the end of 1997. For several weeks the union has been on strike seeking their first contracts. At the time of this printing, no agreement had been reached.

Most [*maquiladora*] workers have no labor unions, and those who do have always been represented by government-controlled unions affiliated with the "official" federations.

On the Border

The *maquiladora* plants, about 80 percent of which are located on the U.S.-Mexican border and many of which are owned by U.S.-based multinationals, assemble products in Mexico for export to the U.S. or other markets. The *maquiladoras* employ about one million workers at about 3,500 plants. About 60 percent of the workers are women, mostly between the ages of 16 and 35. Most of those workers have no labor unions, and those who do have always been represented by government-controlled unions affiliated with the "official" federations.

Those "official" unions negotiate contracts which contain only the legal minimum wages, which are significantly below a livable wage. They provide no other sort of representation for workers. Most *maquiladora* workers earn about four dollars per day, below the minimum needed to support an individual at a decent standard of living, much less provide for a family. Workers who attempt to organize independent unions, democratic caucuses in the official unions, or who take strike action usually find themselves fired, blacklisted, sometimes kidnapped and beaten.

International Labor Solidarity

International solidarity, particularly support from U.S. labor unions and other organizations, has been key to the Han Young workers' efforts. Throughout their struggle they have had the support of the San Diego-based Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers (SCMW), the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, and the Campaign for Labor Rights. At one point the Han Young workers and the SCMW threatened a boycott of Hyundai in the United States unless the company relented. This may have been one factor that forced the Mexican government to recognize their independent union.

International labor solidarity has been crucial to other labor struggles in Mexico as well. For example, workers at the ITAPSA Echlin plant in Reyes La Paz in central Mexico became a focal point for Canadian and U.S. union efforts in the Fall of 1997 after Echlin and the CTM brought in 200 goons armed with pipes and guns to break the attempt of workers to establish an independent union.

Offers of support from various Canadian and U.S. labor unions soon led to the creation of a tri-national, multi-union coalition made up of the Canadian Auto Workers, the United Auto Workers (UAW) Teamsters, UNITE!, United Paper Workers, United Steel Workers, the International Association of Machinists, Authentic Labor Front (FAT), and the United Electrical Workers (UE). Joining a complaint against Echlin before the U.S. Department of Labor's National Administrative Office, which oversees the "labor side agreements" of NAFTA, were the AFL-CIO, the Canadian Labor Congress, and the National Union of Workers. Coalitions of labor unions like this one give Mexican workers some protection in their efforts to organize genuine labor unions in Mexico.

The biggest change in terms of international labor solidarity was the visit by AFL-CIO president John Sweeney to Mexico in early 1998. For the first time an AFL-CIO leader met not only with the pro-government CTM and other "official" unions, but also with the opposition unions such as the UNT and the FAT. Sweeney promised to cooperate with all those groups and organizations working for social justice in Mexico, a pledge which opened up the way for U.S. unions to cooperate not only with the official unions but also with opposition unions, democratic currents within "official" unions, and with non- govern-

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mental organizations and social movements.

The AFL-CIO seemed to quickly find a Mexican partner in the new UNT, which appeared to share many of the values of the American federation. Both represent victories by reformers in the labor movements of each country. But in both cases the reformers have found it difficult to break with the conservative economic agenda and to move into a confrontational approach to management. Both federations continue to seek partnership with their respective employers in order to increase productivity and competitiveness in the world market.

While both Sweeney and Hernandez Juarez talk about looking for new political directions, the former has stuck with the increasingly conservative Democratic Party, while the latter remains an important leader of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Finally, in both countries, despite the talk of new leadership and new programs, the actual accomplishments so far have been few.

Local Efforts Equally Important

While attention tends to focus on leaders like Sweeney and Hernandez Juarez, what local unions and ordinary members do to develop international solidarity is perhaps more important in the long run.

Some local unions are doing creative things in this area. For example, in June, officers of District 1199-P of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), a union of nursing home and hospital workers in central Pennsylvania, invited Mexican and Canadian workers to attend their state-wide assembly.

Francisco Reyes and Ofelia Oliva, from the National Union of Social Security Workers, the largest Mexican public health workers union, and Mary LaPlante, financial secretary of the Hospital Employees Union of British Columbia, participated in the Pennsylvania union's assembly and in a special workshop. Nursing home and hospital workers from all three countries had an opportunity to talk about how privatization and the reorganization of the health care industry were affecting their union members, and what they were doing to try to fight back.

The Pennsylvania workers, many of whom earn low wages working in nursing homes, generously took up a collection to help the Mexican workers buy a computer. Such contacts and ties between local unions and workers can over the years create bonds of solidarity between workers in all three NAFTA countries.

One model for international union relations is that between the UE and the FAT. The UE, a U.S. labor union, and the FAT, a Mexican union, entered into what they call a strategic organizing initiative. The UE and FAT reciprocate, helping each other in organizing campaigns with funds, organizers, and other forms of support. One such collaboration occurred in the Labor Arts Mural Project, funded in part by Resist. Two companion murals with the common themes of international solidarity—one in Mexico City and one in Chicago—focus attention on problems that working people confront in both nations.

With the support of UE and the Teamsters, the FAT opened the Labor Workshop and Study Center (Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral, A.C. or CETLAC) in Ciudad Juarez to help promote the organization of *maquiladora* workers. At the same time, the FAT has sent organizers to the United States to help the UE reach out to Mexican workers living here.

The Mexican labor movement is changing because of the courage or rank-and-file workers like those at Han Young who are standing up for their rights. International labor solidarity from union coalitions and direct contacts between rank and file workers can help protect and encourage Mexican workers. At the same time, workers in the United States and Canada have a lot to learn from the efforts of their Mexican brothers and sisters.

Dan La Botz is the author of Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today *(South End Press, 1992) and* Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform *(South End Press, 1995). He is also the editor of* Mexican Labor News and Analysis *(MLNA), which received a grant from Resist in 1997. MLNA is published electronically twice monthly. For more information, contact MLNA, 3436 Morrison Place, Cincinnati, OH 45220; www.igc.apc.org/unitedelect/.*

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Sweatshop Watch
720 Market Street #50
San Francisco, CA 94102
www.sweatshopwatch.org

Hidden Labor

Common Threads Exhibits History

CAROL SCHACHET, WITH JUDY BRANFMAN

Common Threads, a Los Angeles-based women's group, has been organizing against abuses in Los Angeles' garment industry and trying to build bridges between labor and the broader community since 1995. In addition to supporting garment workers in their struggle to unionize, Common Threads carries out extensive outreach to educate and involve community members.

As part of their cultural outreach, Common Threads artists turned the storefront windows of an abandoned department store into an exhibit of garment industry labor history. The display "Hidden Labor: Uncovering L.A.'s Garment Industry" filled nine large windows of an historic building on the edge of Los Angeles' garment district. The location made it easy for casual strollers, a diverse cross-section of people who work downtown and local activists to learn about the garment industry, including the extremely high profits and low wages inherent to the industry.

To develop the installation, eight artists interviewed several dozen of L.A.'s retired and present-day garment workers, ranging in age from 20 to 100. These interviews, accompanied by photos, an historical time line and collected and assembled items, form the heart of the exhibit.

The exhibit chronologically highlights workers' efforts from the turn of the century to the present. One of the nine windows focuses on the story of the organizing of thousands of sportswear workers in 1933, mainly Latinas. Other windows chart the changing demographics of a largely immigrant workforce that was once mostly Jewish and Italian and is now primarily immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Another window reflects the experiences of several of the Thai garment workers who worked in semi-slavery in El Monte and outlines the Retailer Code of Conduct that was endorsed in 1996 by the L.A. City Council. The final window, "Time For A Change," highlights garment workers fired by GUESS? for their union organizing efforts and their campaign for unionization. Photos of some of these window panels are shown below.

Carol Schachet edits the Resist Newsletter *and relied on material from Judy Branfman and Common Threads. The "Hidden History" can be viewed on line at: www.usc.edu/Library/Ref/LA/PubArt/Downtown/HiddenLabor. The exhibit is available in slides (10 slides FOR $6) or in video form ($20). For more information, contact Common Threads, PO Box 962, Venice, CA 90294. Common Threads received grants from Resist,in 1997 and 1998 to prepare and reproduce the exhibit.*

At the turn of the century, immigrants, mainly Jewish and Italian, became the backbone of the thriving garment industry and the young garment unions in New York. Union organizing was more common in the Northeast than in the West. Los Angeles was well known for being an anti-union town, and manufacturers were attracted to and profited from the lack of strong unions and industry regulations. However, that began to change in the 1930s (see photo at right), when female garment workers in Los Angeles began to organize. *Photo by Bill Short*

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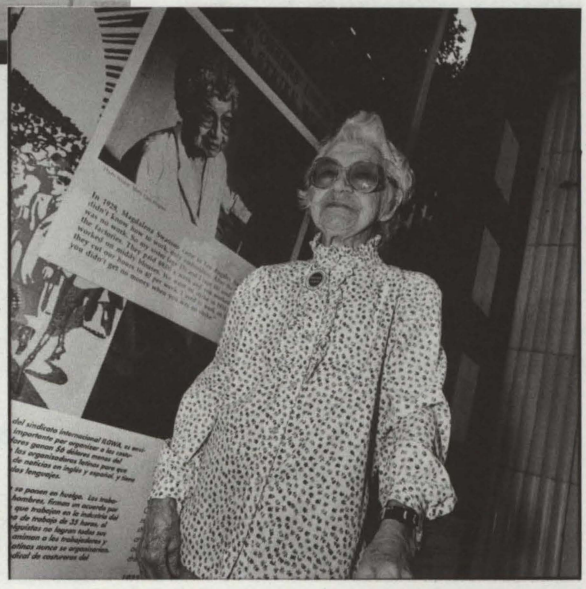
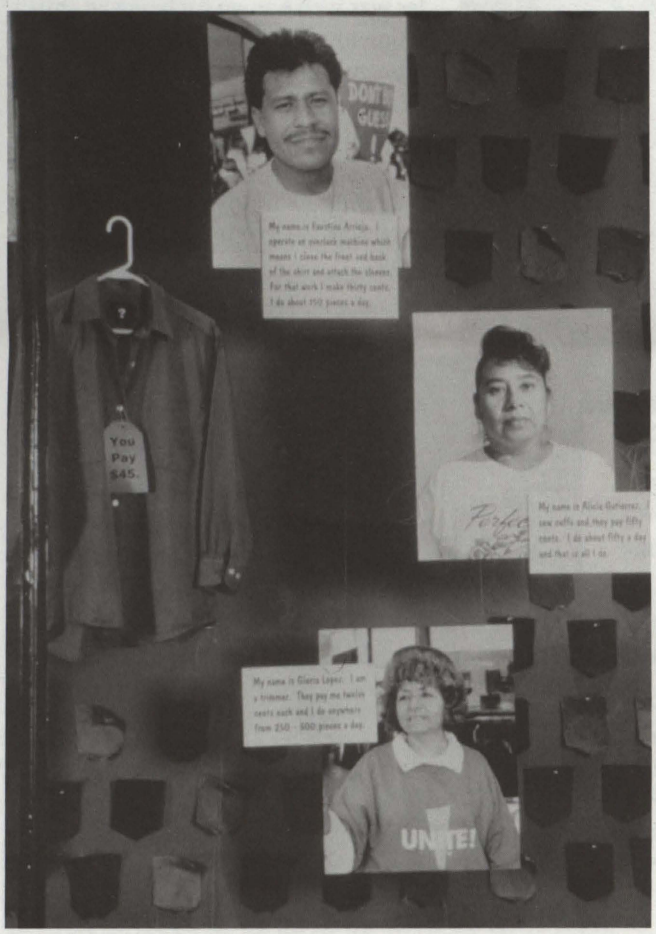
During the 1930s, union organizing began to gain momentum. Membership in Los Angeles' ILGWU (International Ladies' Garment Workers Union) surged from 300 to 4,000 members. At right, Magdalena Swanson, a garment worker interviewed for the exhibit, stands next to her photo in the window of the Hidden Labor Exhibit. *Photo by Slobodan Dimitrov*



The photo at left shows women workers in the post-World War II era demanding better working conditions. During the war, the garment industry expanded in Los Angeles. Afterward, the industry shifted from producing war-time products to fashion-conscious, moderately-priced sportswear and the "California look" developed. Because of the relative instability of fashion, apparel manufacturers increased their use of contracting shops where they didn't have to be responsible for workers' "down-time" (periods without work).

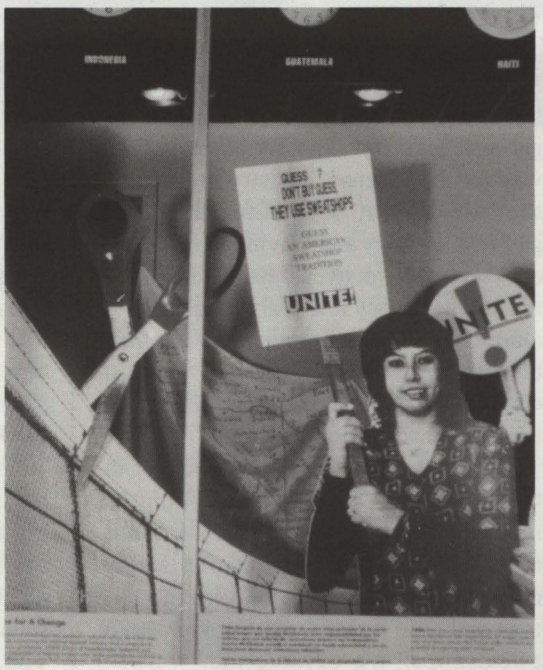
The garment industry depends on a hierarchy of competition and exploitation. At the top, retailers compete with each other, attempting to undercut each other's prices. Manufacturers, who design and merchandise products and give clothes their labels, are also in fierce competition. They face intense pressure from retailers to lower their prices. Manufacturers, in turn, contract out sewing and other labor-intensive aspects of production to thousands of small contracting shops. These shops are typically the direct exploiters of the workers, but they also are faced with competition and pressure from above to cut prices. So the contractors, who are in direct control of the workplace, claim little ability to change it, and the people at the top, who create public perception, claim they have no responsibility. The result is that garment workers are paid poverty wages while the owners and top managers of apparel firms are often multi-millionaires. The use of numerous contracting shops has made union organizing much more difficult. *Photo by Bill Short*

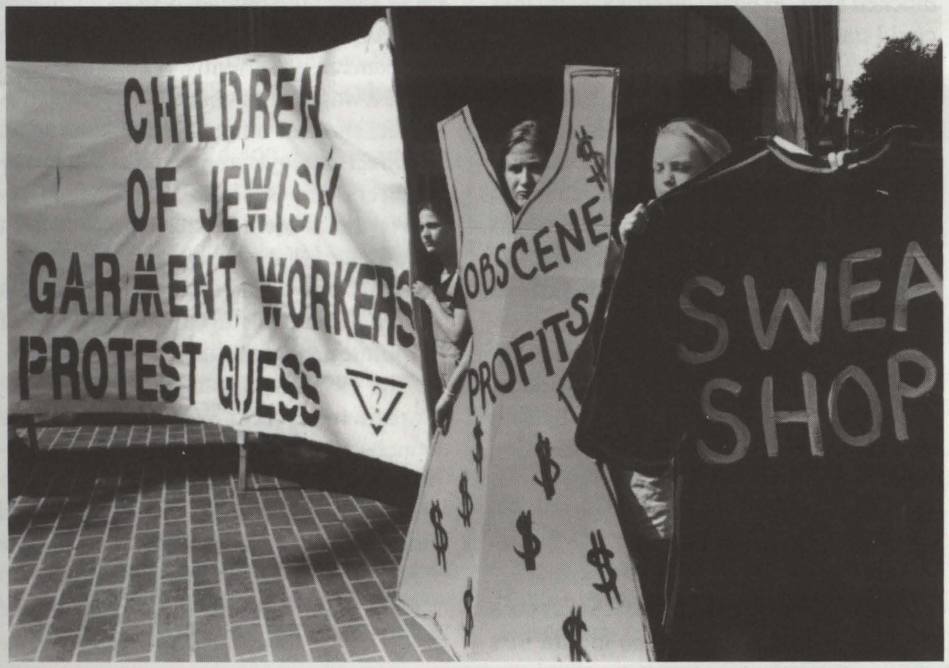


With the advance of transportation and communications, manufacturers and retailers began to produce garments in other countries, particularly in Asia and Latin America. The result was a growth in imports and an overall loss of U.S. apparel jobs. While the traditionally unionized men's wear industry moved overseas in the 1960s (to become non-union), the traditionally non-unionized sportswear industry remained and flourished in Los Angeles. California became the only state where employment in the garment industry grew, and most of these were non-union jobs in Los Angeles. Apparel is the largest manufacturing industry in Los Angeles, with more than 120,000 workers. As many as 1/3 of the approximately 4,000 contracting shops are not registered with the state and operate in an underground economy. Employees in the garment industry are most often paid by the piece rather than hourly, which very often results in their earning below the minimum wage. If employees work fast enough to succeed in earning the minimum wage, the piece rate is often lowered. Workers whose interviews appear in this window display say, "Some days I do 600 pieces." *Photo by Bill Short.*

In 1996 Common Threads was sued by Guess? for "slandering" them at a poetry reading organized to support workers fired by Guess? for organizing. The SLAPP suit (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) gave the Guess? organizing campaign being run by UNITE (Union of Needletrade, Industrial and Textile Employees) and Common Threads a lot of publicity and generated a second reading ("The Literary Event GUESS? Couldn't Shut Down"). GUESS? dropped the suit early in 1997. The artists have also produced several posters, which have been plastered guerilla-style all over town and placed in buses. *Photo by Judy Branfman*

The return of sweatshops has sparked a national outcry. As a first step towards organizing the massive apparel industry, and in response to numerous grievances, UNITE is helping workers who make garments for GUESS? in their efforts to organize. With increased attention on labor violations, GUESS? and other large companies are threatening to move production outside the United States, where there are lower wages and fewer regulatory standards. At right, this window at the Hidden Labor exhibit declared that it was "Time for a Change." *Photo by Bill Short*





As part of Common Threads' "Adopt a Mall" Campaign, they adopted the Beverly Center Mall on the edge of Beverly Hills, where numerous rallies and pickets took place over two years. In conjunction with three progressive Jewish Groups (Sholem Community, Workmen's Circle and Jewish Labor Committee) and WILPF, and drawing on the rich tradition of Jews fighting sweatshop conditions, Common Threads and activist garment workers organized a rally/cultural event with the theme "Children and Grandchildren of Jewish Garment Workers say No More Sweatshops" in March 1997. *Photo by Judy Branfman*

Combatting Global Sweatshops

Coalition of Sweatshop Watch Members Demand Justice

NIKKI FORTUNATO BAS

A sweatshop is broadly defined as a workplace where workers are subject to extreme exploitation, including the absence of a living wage or benefits, poor working conditions and arbitrary discipline. The current trends of economic globalization, free trade and deregulation have brought on a resurgence of sweatshops in low-wage industries, particularly in the garment industry. NAFTA has paved the way for the garment industry to jump the southern border, devastating the Texas garment industry and leaving many workers without alternatives. Meanwhile, workers in other states fear losing their jobs as more and more shops move overseas where big-name brands pay starvation wages in countries like China, Indonesia, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

Sweatshop Watch is a coalition of labor, community, civil rights, immigrant rights and women's organizations committed to eliminating the exploitation that occurs in sweatshops. We believe that human and civil rights are being violated in sweatshops. We believe that workers should be earning a living wage in a safe and decent working environment. We believe that those who benefit the most from the exploitation of sweatshop workers must be held accountable.

California is the country's largest garment-producing state with 160,000 garment workers. These workers are predominantly immigrant women from China, Mexico, Vietnam, El Salvador and other Asian and Latin American countries. They typically toil 6 days a week, 10 - 12 hours a day in front of their machines, often without minimum wage or overtime pay. In fact, in May the Labor Department released the results of a survey of the Los Angeles garment industry, revealing that over 60% of surveyed shops violate wage and hour laws. This lack of minimum wage and overtime pay means that garment workers have to work excessive hours to make ends meet. Many turn their homes into sewing factories, taking work home, involving their children in work, and sewing late into the night.

Photo by Robert Gumpert

In addition, many garment workers labor in dangerous conditions. In the first government assessment of health and safety hazards in Southern California's garment industry, 75% of sewing shops were found to violate safety and health laws. The survey, released in May, found blocked exits, exposed electrical parts that could start a fire or cause an electrocution, and a lack of safety guards on sewing and cutting equipment to prevent workers from having their fingers cut off. In every case, the hazards were judged serious enough that an accident could lead to a "substantial probability of death or serious physical harm." In California's other industries, the percentage of companies with serious safety hazards is well below 50%.

Given the failure of federal and state labor laws to make workplaces safe, workers, advocates and activists are combatting sweatshop abuses in a variety of ways.

Corporate Accountability

Today's garment industry can be described as a pyramid where big-name retailers and brand-name manufacturers contract with sewing shops, who in turn hire garment workers to make the finished product. Retailers and manufacturers at the top of the pyramid dictate how much workers earn in wages by controlling the contract price given to the contractor. With these prices declining each year by as much as 25%, contractors are forced to "sweat" a profit from garment workers by working them long hours at low wages. The $100 sale price of a garment is typically divided up as $50 to the retailer, $35 to the manufacturer, $10 to the contractor, and $5 to the seamstress. Currently, if a worker wants to file a wage claim with the labor commissioner, she can only hold the contractor, her direct employer, responsible. Yet, manufacturers and retailers have already received their orders and have profited from the sweat of that worker.

Many of Sweatshop Watch's members have been successful in raising issues of corporate accountability.

*In 1995, Sweatshop Watch and the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates launched the Retailer Accountability Campaign with Thai and Latino garment workers against retailers who received and sold clothes sewn at the notorious El Monte slave sweatshop. Through letter-writing to retailers and public demonstrations at

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Robinson's-May and Macy's, we were able to help collect back wages for the El Monte garment workers. And in October 1997, Sweatshop Watch co-founder Julie Su won an historic legal victory when five major companies, including Mervyn's and Montgomery Ward, were ordered to pay more than $2 million to the El Monte workers. So despite the subcontracting system, workers can fight back and win just compensation from the giant companies that profit from their labor.

*The Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in Oakland, California galvanized support from the labor movement, universities, high schools, women's and community groups to walk picket lines, bringing four apparel companies to the table with workers. In 1995, AIWA helped win a settlement for workers who sewed Jessica McClintock dresses for a contractor who left them with bad checks. In 1996, AIWA won bilingual toll-free hotlines from Esprit, Byer California and Fritzi California for garment workers wishing to report complaints.

*Since the layoff of 1,150 workers in San Antonio by Levi's in 1990, Fuerza Unida has been campaigning for corporate accountability (see page 10). Levi's claimed it had to stay competitive and moved production to Costa Rica where workers made in a day what San Antonio workers made in a half-hour. The layoff hit the mostly Mexican American seamstresses hard. Many received less than 24 hours notice and little retraining assistance. Many were also left with permanent workplace injuries. Fuerza Unida has sustained its campaign for just compensation from Levi's and is also running a sewing cooperative. In November 1997, Levi's laid of 6,400 workers in four states, but this time offered a much better severance package, having learned its lesson from San Antonio. Fuerza Unida is calling on supporters to take this opportunity to ask Levi's to open new negotiations with Fuerza Unida on behalf of the laid-off San Antonio workers and provide an equivalent severance package.

Worker Rights Across Race & Borders

Sweatshop Watch members, including the Asian Pacific American Legal Center and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, are coming together to fill a void in providing information to garment workers in Los Angeles. Organizations and community members do outreach for bi-monthly workers' rights workshops by leafleting in the garment district, churches and schools, and by running public service announcements in ethnic and community media. The workshops start with a skit performed by members from the garment workers union UNITE, who outline basic worker rights and the importance of keeping a timesheet.

Sweatshop Watch members held a presentation on the structure of the garment industry. They explained to workers what their connection is to retailers and consumers and the importance of keeping labels of the clothes they sew so they can demand corporate accountability.

Photo by Robert Gumpert

Sweatshop Watch member Common Threads showed an exhibit on the history of struggle in the garment industry (see page 5). The exhibit went from European immigrants winning an 8-hour day to current organizing in immigrant communities. This helps build worker solidarity among different ethnic groups, and also opens the door for workers to do their own organizing. Many workers hesitate to speak out, fearing deportation or job loss, so there's also a presentation on your rights in the instance of an INS raid, and an opportunity to talk one-on-one with a volunteer lawyer about individual cases.

Using the power of the dollar

Sweatshop Watch is building a base of individual members who can use their influence as consumers to pressure companies to respect workers rights. Consumers have the power to impact the bottom-lines of industry giants. They have worked in solidarity with garment workers in a Gap factory in El Salvador to win an independent monitoring project. Consumers have also supported Guatemalan workers in winning the first collective bargaining agreement in the maquiladora sector from Phillips-Van Heusen.

In addition to actions, Sweatshop Watch offers public education through our quarterly newsletter, our web site <www.sweatshopwatch.org>, and a traveling educational photo exhibit about garment workers titled, "Faces Behind the Labels." If you are in the Washington, DC-area, you can visit the Smithsonian Institution's controversial sweatshop exhibit "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops from the 1820s to Present," which includes a section on the El Monte sweatshop and features Sweatshop Watch co-founder Julie Su as one of six industry leaders, alongside government and company representatives.

With growing public concern about sweatshops, there is also a new movement to implement "no sweat" public purchasing policies prohibiting cities from buying sweatshop-made goods. Sweatshop Watch and the garment workers union UNITE are currently working on creating a model purchasing policy in San Francisco. Among students, there is also a growing movement for labor codes of conduct in licensing agreements of sweatshirts, caps and other gear with school logos. However, the challenge of these purchasing policies and codes of conduct is to include a commitment to paying workers a living wage. Unless workers are able to meet their basic needs and save for the future by working a decent workweek, sweatshops will persist.

Nikki Fortunato Bas is Program Coordinator at Sweatshop Watch.
Sweatshop Watch received a grant from Resist this June. For more information, contact Sweatshop Watch, 310 Eighth Street, Suite 309, Oakland CA 94607; www.sweatshopwatch.org.

Las Nuevas Revolucionarias

Fuerza Unida Moves Beyond Struggle Against Levi's

LUZ GUERRA

Fuerza Unida, formed in 1990 by laid-off Levi's workers, is made up of some of the most disenfranchised workers in the country: women, immigrants, non-unionized laborers, most of whom are over age 40. Fuerza Unida has often been likened to a modern-day David taking on the Goliath Levi Strauss & Co. It is the image of their supposed powerlessness as the underclass of the underclass that makes Fuerza Unida such an attractive poster child for workers rights.

The Birth of Fuerza Unida

Fuerza Unida was formed in 1990 by women laid off when Levi's closed their plant on South Zarzamora Street.

Levi's bought the South Zarzamora Street plant in 1981, after contracting production their since the 1970s. By 1989 the plant was producing an average of 16,000 trousers and 500 jackets a day. In July 1989, Levi's called them the "miracle" plant and workers were given a $200 bonus for such high profits. Such production was not profitable enough, however, from Levi's point of view.

In 1989, production switched to Levi's popular Docker's pants. Cost for labor and production at the South Zarzamora plant was $6.70 per pair. Feeling the pressure to keep the costs down and production high, workers struggled to increase production. Yet the Zarzamora plant workers still couldn't compete with the $5.88 per unit cost at a Levi's plant in Tennessee, and no US worker could compete with $3.76 per unit cost using Third World contractors.

Averaging $6.00 an hour in 1989, the South Zarzamora Street workers were not getting rich. But working at Levi's meant earning a little piece of the American Dream.

That dream ended on January 17, 1990, when managers laid off 1,115 workers. Of these workers, 92% were Latina, 86% were women. Some had been at the same job for 30 or 40 years. Shock turned to grief and grief to anger as the workers shared their stories of frustration. A meeting of laid-off workers was organized, and the result was the formation of Fuerza Unida.

Members of Fuerza Unida protest in front of the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio in response to Levi's closing 11 factories and cutting 6,400 jobs. ***Photo courtesy of Fuerza Unida***

Workers Pay Price for Corporate Profit

In retrospect the workers were early victims of NAFTA and globalization. The plant closing proved to be advance warning of the perils of free trade. The San Antonio plant was not the first nor the last that Levi's shut down. The company closed 58 US plants putting 10,400 people out of work between 1981 and 1990, shifting about half its manufacturing to hired factories overseas where the best-paid seamstresses made about one-tenth of the wages of their US counterparts.

On November 3, 1997, Levi's announced the closure of 11 more of its US plants and layoffs of 6,395 workers, representing one third of its total manufacturing workforce in the US and Canada. Although the company swore that it was not taking these jobs overseas, on April 8, 1998, Levi's announced plans to return production to China "because the human rights environment has improved."

Out of the thousands of workers Levi's laid off, the San Antonio workers were the first to organize and sustain protests demanding justice from the company. Fuerza Unida was born at an emergency meeting of the laid-off workers at Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles/Our Lady of the Angels Church on February 12, 1990. Fuerza Unida quickly drew some 700 members. Over the next 5 years the women met almost every week to discuss their struggle, make plans and carry out actions.

> "We are still fighting against Levi's. We realize we are also fighting against a system that is against workers, against poor people, against women."
> —Petra Mata
> Fuerza Unida

Creating Consciousness and Action

The women of Fuerza Unida will be the first to tell you that, prior to being laid off, they had no consciousness of being part of a larger community of workers, had no understanding of their place in the global market place, had no analysis or thoughts about their status as women in the workplace or at home.

When the South Zarzamora Street Levi's plant closed, the workers' world came crashing down. Many workers received less than 24 hours notice (although 90 days notice was required). Denied their full benefits and useful retraining, workers lost not only their jobs, but also their cars, homes and peace of mind.

Local labor organizers helped the women of Fuerza Unida form an organization to fight Levi's, exposing them to new visions of the world. Yet who they were in the world was still being defined by someone else: Levi's had defined them as workers, machine operators; newspapers defined them as immigrants, limited-literacy

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adults, unskilled laborers; activists defined them as representatives of the effects of economic globalization.

Fuerza Unida became caught up in years of around-the-clock activism. Driven by their desire for justice they took on their new work as activists with great enthusiasm and high hopes for victory. After eight years of struggle, Fuerza Unida can feel good about the gains they've made as an organization.

Fuerza Unida issued a national call for solidarity for its campaign against Levi's and received endorsements and support from organizations and communities around the country. Supporters organized protests in front of Levi's outlets in cities and distributed educational materials locally, nationally and internationally. With the help of supporters, Fuerza Unida sent in thousands of Levi's labels to the company's CEO, Robert Haas in San Francisco. Workers organized community tribunals in San Antonio and San Francisco in 1992 that included testimony from workers, elected officials, religious, labor, student and Latino community organizations.

In October 1994, Fuerza Unida and supporters carried out a 21-day hunger strike at the corporate headquarters in San Francisco. Strikers drank only water to protest injustices and draw attention to workers' plight. Since the 1997/98 layoffs, Fuerza Unida and supporters reactivated their network, launched letter writing and postcard campaigns, appeared in numerous media outlets, produced a campaign bulletin, set up an e-mail alert network and Internet Web page, and organized national days of action to demand that Levi's open dialogue and grant a comparable severance package to the San Antonio workers.

Fuerza Unida's many years of organizing for corporate accountability led to the company offering a much better severance package to Levi's workers who lost their jobs on November 3, 1997. Referring to the 1997/98 severance package, a Levi's spokesman from Dallas acknowledged to the *Albuquerque Journal* (November 11, 1997) that, "because of some of the lessons learned in San Antonio, you see what we have here today." He also admitted that, "There's no denying that San Antonio in 1990 had something to do with the development of these benefits in 1997," and that the company failed to anticipate how much criticism it would receive from the San Antonio community. Fuerza Unida considers the current package a partial victory and tribute to the long years of struggle, even though San Antonio workers did not receive the direct fruits of their hard work. Fuerza Unida, however, continues to receive calls from Levi's workers around the country reporting negligence and abuses by the company. Fuerza Unida will continue to monitor the company's practices.

> "It hurts us that women still think badly of themselves, that they don't know they can raise their voices, that they have a voice to speak and to demand their rights."
> —Petra Mata, Fuerza Unida

The Next Stage

Fuerza Unida is now engaged in what may be their biggest battle yet: to establish themselves as a community-based organization dedicated to supporting and empowering poor, working-class women of San Antonio, on their own terms. They are challenged to survive financially as a group of women who are limited in their English-language skills, who have had little formal education, and who have little access to economic resources either as individuals or as an organization.

A group of 10 community women, along with Fuerza Unida's co-coordinators Petra Mata and Viola Caseres, designed an extensive study on the lives of women and men who lost their jobs at the South Zarzamora plant. The project, called "San Antonio Women in Crisis," includes interviews of nearly half of the 1,115 former Levi's workers about their past and current economic status and about their employment history since the layoffs, and compare the data with San Antonio as a whole. They conducted a week-long training for the survey team with the help of AFSC-TAO staff and a grant from Resist.

Fuerza Unida launched the Sewing Cooperative as a way for members to use old skills learned in the garment industry and to recruit new members and broaden the community base. The coop has now become a successful fundraiser. Ten to fifteen members and volunteers come at least once a week to sort, cut, stuff, and sew the material. Workers are trained to produce comforter sets, pillowcases, tablecloths, place mats, throw pillows, blankets, drapes, curtains, and other items. The coop will also serve as a model for women workers interested in starting other income generating projects and cooperatives.

The Food Bank project was started as a way to bring in new members and build relations with the community. Fuerza Unida distributes from 50 to 70 boxes of food a month from the Food Bank. Members and volunteers box and distribute the food to members in need and other community members referred by the food bank, churches, and even local food stamp offices. On the average about 30 volunteers come to the center to help get the boxes ready each month. Because Fuerza Unida does not want to make people dependent, the group asks that once the emergency is over, people volunteer at the center at least 8 hours each month.

Fuerza Unida is more than a place where people work and organize. It is a place where people are building human relationships, the very thing Levi's overlooked in their insistence on keeping their products competitive. It is a spiritual place, and that—as much as the boycott, or the struggle of these unemployed workers for justice—is what brings people back to Fuerza Unida day after day.

Luz Guerra was Peace Education Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee—Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma. This article is adapted with permission from News from the AFSC-TAO, *October 1997, and with information from Miriam Ching-Louie and Antonio Diaz. Fuerza Unida received a grant from Resist in 1997. For more information, contact them at Fuerza Unida, 710 New Laredo Highway, San Antonio, TX 78211-1932.*

GRANTS

Resist awards grants eight times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in activism for social and economic justice. In each issue of the *Newsletter* we list a few recent grant recipients. In this issue, we include grantees from our June allocation cycle. For more information, contact the groups at the addresses below.

Rising Generation Represent

c/o Quabbin Mediation
P.O. Box 544
Athol, MA 01331

Rising Generation Represents (RGR) was founded in 1996 by five Cambodian men and women in their late teens to deal with the racism, ageism, classism and sexism they felt they and their peers face in Western Massachusetts. Representing a loose group of 30 or more young multicultural and multi-ethnic adults, they decided to take responsibility for attempting to change the injustices they saw surrounding them. RGR members developed a conflict resolution curriculum for young people (mostly of color, predominately Asian and low-income) between the ages of 12 and 19. This curriculum, used by RGR in the schools and the community looks at the roots of violence and anger that stem from oppression, and helps direct that anger in positive channels that benefit their families and community.

A $2,000 grant from Resist will fund the Asian Young Minds Society, a theater project which will look at issues of conflict facing young Cambodians and their families.

Latinos Unidos Siempre

3248 Market Street
Salem, OR 97301
mano@open.org

Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS) works toward the educational, cultural, social and political development of Latina/o youth. LUS was formed in 1996 by 13 students who came together in response to the Immigration and Naturalization raids in their community, the increase in the high school drop-out rate, the growth in gang violence and their opposition to the anti-immigrant initiatives being proposed in Oregon. Through this program, youth take pro-active leadership roles in the community to advocate for social and political change, including confrontation of racist stereotyping and discrimination.

A $2,000 grant from Resist will be used for general support of LUS projects that challenge racism, sexism and homophobia.

Alaska Forum for Environmental Responsibility

P.O. Box 188
Valdez, AK
www.alaska.net~afervdz

The Alaska Forum for Environmental Responsibility is dedicated to holding industry and governments accountable to the public mandate to safeguard Alaska's environment, to provide a safe and retaliation-free workplace, and to achieve a sustainable economy in Alaska. The Alaska Forum was founded in 1994 by three whistle-blowers who were the subject of a spy operation conducted by Wackenhut Security Company and paid for by Aleyska (the company that operates the trans-Alaska pipeline). A financial settlement against Aleyska was used to launch the Alaska Forum.

A $1,500 grant from Resist will be used to upgrade computer equipment used in the Alaska Forum's advocacy and outreach efforts.

Manhattan Alliance for Peace and Justice

P.O. Box 1561
Manhattan, KS 66505

The Manhattan Alliance for Peace and Justice (MAPJ) was originally founded in 1984 as the Manhattan Alliance on Central America, organizing opposition to U.S. policy in Nicaragua and Central America. In 1995, the group reorganized itself, with the larger mission to educate for peace and justice at home and abroad. MAPJ is currently working on and supporting issues including: welfare reform concerns, labor organizing projects, campaign finance reform, and community political education.

A $1,000 grant from Resist will fund the organization of a living wage campaign in conjunction with five local unions.